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ABSTRACT

Full-time, degree-seeking students who transferred to the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP), in fall 1983 and whose fall semester grade point average (GPA) was less than 2.0 (N=244) were invited to participate in a diagnostic and prescriptive program designed to help them figure out why their grades were low and how to prevent such grades in the future. The intervention program included an initial meeting with a counselor during which the student identified major causes of his/her low grades and worked with the counselor to draw up an academic action plan for obtaining assistance. Later, a follow-up meeting was held, during which the student and counselor discussed the actions the student had taken both within and beyond the academic action plan. Of the 244 students who received the invitation, 61 attended both meetings. Of these, 57% reported having pursued at least one of the campus resources for academic assistance listed on their action plan and 49% persisted and were in good academic standing in spring 1984. Study findings suggest that transfer students in academic jeopardy who meet individually with a counselor for diagnostic and prescriptive information, and who sign a mutually arrived at academic action plan, persist and do better academically than students who receive no such treatment. (Author/EJV)

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DIAGNOSTIC AND PRESCRIPTIVE INTERVIEWS WITH TRANSFER STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC JEOPARDY

Research Report #16-87

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DIAGNOSTIC AND PRESCRIPTIVE INTERVIEWS

WITH TRANSFER STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC JEOPARDY

Research Report #16-87

The Counseling Center Retention Study Group*

Vivian Boyd, Steven Carstens, Patricia Hunt,
Stanley Hunt, Brian McLaren, Thomas Magoon

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Diagnostic and Prescriptive Interviews with Transfer Students in Academic Jeopardy

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Summary

Fulltime degree-seeking students who transferred to UMCP in the fall semester and whose fall semester GPA was less than 2.0 were invited the following spring to participate in a diagnostic and prescriptive program designed to help transfer students with low grades to figure out why their grades were low and how to prevent such grades in the future. The program included am initial interview, in which a behavioral contract was drawn up, and a follow up interview, in which a discussion took place concerning what actions the student had taken both within and beyond the behavioral contract. There were significant differences in the rate of students who persisted with no academic action taken against them, both for the semester of intervention and for the semester following intervention, for treatment group students whose pre-intervention GPA was below the treatment group median. One year after the intervention occurred the differences were still in evidence although they were not statistically significant. The results suggest that transfer students in academic jeopardy who meet individually with a counselor for diagnostic and prescriptive information, and who sign a mutually arrived at academic action plan, persist and do better academically than students with no such treatment.

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Diagnostic and Prescriptive Interviews with Transfer Students in Academic Jeopardy

The Counseling Center Retention Study Group*
University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland

One of the reasons cited by students who drop out of college before graduation is dissatisfaction with grades (Lenning, Beal, & Sauer, 1980). Regardless of the reasons behind the dissatisfaction with grades, it is generally agreed that once a college or university admits a student into a degree program, responsibility is placed both on the institution to provide support services that will enable the student to achieve his/her educational goals, and on the student to take advantage of the resources the university has to offer. It has been observed that for students with a low grade point average, use of campus facilities is correlated with persistence, and can perhaps be seen as a measure of integration into the college community (Churchill & Iwai, 1981).

Many students in academic jeopardy fail to avail themselves of the resources provided for them by the university (Romano & Young, 1981). There is some indication that one reason for this failure is that while students know about certain campus agencies - the undergraduate advising center, the financial aid office, the tutor referral service, for example - few are aware of the

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existence and location of other campus resource agencies available to provide substantial help to those who wish to improve their academic performance (Altmaier, Rapaport, & Seeman, 1983).

In the interest of academic retention, colleges and universities are taking an increasingly proactive stance, and contacting academically at-risk students to offer them specific services (Glennon, 1976; Himelstein & Himelstein, 1977; Hudesman, Avramides, Loveday, Waber, & Wendell, 1983; Landward & Hepworth, 1984; Letchworth & Bleidt, 1983; Retention Study Group, 1986); Romano & Young, 1981; Tata, 1981; Tricomi, Donaruma, Dugan, & Cuevas, 1982.

Interventions where the contact involved mail and/or telephone showed no effect on GPA or student retention when compared with a nontreatment control group (Letchworth & Bleidt, 1983; Tata, 1981) . Studies which required at-risk students to enroll in a semester-long academic skills program showed positive effects on GPA for the semester of intervention, but these effects were not durable and seemed only to delay attrition (Himelstein and Himelstein, 1977; Landward and Hepworth, 1984).

Several studies have offered freshmen in academic jeopardy a diagnostic and prescriptive interview session with a counselor in which the students were given specific information concerning campus resources to help them cope with their self-identified problem areas (The Retention Study Group, 1986; Warman, 1983). They found that those students who participated reenroll at higher rates and do better academically than students not

receiving such interviews.

Hudesman, Avramides, Loveday, Waber, & Wendell (1983) designed a study where community college students with a two semester cumulative GPA of less than 2.00 participated in at least three semi-structured counseling sessions which focused on academic and non-academic concerns and which made use of a behavioral contract. The treatment group showed an increase in their grade point averages as compared to the control group ($p < .05$). Students involved in this program had been enrolled at the community college for at least two semesters and hence had more time and money invested in their higher education than freshmen, a consideration to be kept in mind when designing retention programs.

The purpose of the present study was to combine features of the Warman (1983) and the Hudesman et al. (1983) studies and to investigate the impact on retention rates of a diagnostic and prescriptive interview format with a behavioral contract.

METHOD

In Spring semester 1984, a random list was generated of 350 fulltime degree-seeking students who transferred to UMCP in Fall 1983 and whose Fall 1983 GPA was less than 2.00. Students who were involved in other retention interventions or who had no local address and/or phone number were deleted from the study. Every 6th name was then selected for the nontreatment control group (n = 48). The remaining 244 students were sent a letter from the Undergraduate Dean. The letter expressed concern at the student's academic performance, and recommended consultation with

advisor or faculty member. The letter also served to alert the students of a possible phone call from a Counseling Center staff member to arrange an interview time with them as part of a program designed to help students with low grades to figure out why their grades were low and how to prevent such grades in the future.

The incentive for participating, intensified by the letter with the Dean's encouragement to participate, was the opportunity to learn how to improve their grades and hence their chances of graduating.

The Initial Interview

At the beginning of the first interview session, students completed a Problem Checklist, developed by Warman (1983), and modified slightly for this study. The student was asked to check which of 22 common causes of low grades were causes of his/her grades, and then to circle those which were major causes. During discussion of the student's particular issues, the counselor drew up an academic action plan, signed by both the counselor and the student. The plan listed the campus resources that the student and counselor mutually agreed might be of help to the student, using a campus Resource Manual prepared for the study and indexed to follow the Problem Checklist.

The Followup Interview

A followup interview was scheduled for a month later, at which time the counselor discussed with the student what actions the student had taken both within and beyond the signed academic agreement; what the student's plans were for the rest of the

semester; and whether the student had other questions or issues.

Outcome Variables

There were two primary outcome variables studied for four semesters subsequent to the semester of intervention in order to determine the effect of the intervention on subject retention rates:

(1) academic persistence, defined as registered for and completed a given semester;

(2) persistence "in good standing," defined as registered for and completed a given semester and with no academic action taken as a result of that semester;

In addition, semester grade point averages, as determined by the University three weeks after the end of the given semester were also examined to evaluate the effect of the intervention on academic performance.

All data concerning registration status, academic action, and grade point averages were obtained from University records.

RESULTS

Of the 244 students who received the letter from the Undergraduate Dean, 174 (71%) were also contacted by phone. Of these, 61 students were scheduled for and completed the two interviews. Thirty-five completed the initial interview and either did not want to schedule a followup interview or did not show up for the scheduled followup interview. Because these 35 students did not receive the full treatment, they were dropped from the analyses.

Of the two-interview students, 57% percent reported at the

followup interview that they had pursued at least one of the resources on their academic agreement form.

Academic Persistence

Table 1 shows academic persistence by group. For the semester of intervention, none of the treatment group had dropped out, whereas 15% of the control group dropped out. By the end of the following semester (Fall, 1984) 64% of the treatment group had persisted, as opposed to 58% of the control group. While these differences do not reach statistical significance, using the chi square statistic, they are in the expected direction.

Table 1.

Academic Persistence by Group

	Group			
	Treatment		Controls	
Semester	n	%	n	%
Spring '84(a)	61	100	41	85
Fall '84	39	64	28	58
Spring '85	35	57	27	56
Fall '85	31	52	24	50
Spring '86	35	57	26	54

(a) semester of intervention

Academic Persistence "in Good Standing"

Table 2 shows rates of students who persisted in good standing, by group. For the semester of intervention (Spring, 1984), 49% of the treatment group persisted and were in good standing, as opposed to 33% of the control group. For the following semester, the difference in rates is less apparent.

In educational research, many factors in addition to the

ones under investigation can act on the outcome variable (in this case, academic action). Therefore, because we wanted to be careful not to conclude that the intervention had not yielded a difference when in fact it had, we investigated further. When the groups are split at the preintervention GPA median (1.40) a difference becomes apparent. In both Spring 1984 and Fall 1984 semesters, the treatment group subjects in the below-the-median group were registered and in good standing in significantly higher numbers than their comparable control group: for Spring 1984, 43% as opposed to 16% (chi square = 6.14; $p < .05$; for Fall 1984, 34% as opposed to 11% (chi square = 7.23; $p < .05$). One year after the intervention occurred the differences are still in evidence although they are not significant, using the chi square statistic.

Table 2.

Rates of 'Persisted and in Good Standing' by Group

	Group			
	Treatment		Controls	
Semester	n	%	n	%
Spring '84(a)				
whole sample	30	49	16	33
above median	15	58	12	52
below median	15	43	4	16(1)
Fall '84				
whole sample	28	46	21	44
above median	16	62	13	57
below median	12	34	8	11(2)
Spring '85				
whole sample	29	48	22	46
above median	15	58	13	57
below median	14	40	9	36
Fall '85				
whole sample	27	48	21	44
above median	14	54	13	57
below median	15	44	8	32
Spring '86				
whole sample	21	34	14	29
above median	8	31	10	44
below median	13	37	4	17

(a) semester of intervention
(1) chi square = 6.14 $p<.05$
(2) chi square = 7.23 $p<.05$

Semester Grade Point Average

A secondary outcome variable is presented in Table 3, which shows semester grade point average by semester. For the semester of intervention, the treatment group as a whole showed no difference in GPA from the control group, as measured by the analysis of variance procedure. When divided into above- and below-the-preintervention GPA median, the above-the-median group showed more grade improvement than the comparable control group. No GPA differences were apparent between the two below-the-median

groups.

Table 3.

Semester Grade Point Average by Group

	Group			
	Treatment		Controls	
Semester	M	S.D.	M	S.D.
Spring '84(a)				
whole sample	1.94	.84	1.93	.84
above median	2.17	.70	2.06	.47
below median	1.76	.90	1.79	1.09
Fall '84				
whole sample	2.37	.52	2.16	.59
above median	2.50	.38	2.16	.65
below median	2.25	.61	2.16	.49
Spring '85				
whole sample	2.38	.77	2.42	.64
above median	2.44	.66	2.36	.66
below median	2.32	.89	2.51	.62
Fall '85				
whole sample	2.25	.72	2.31	.79
above median	2.37	.50	2.39	.81
below median	2.14	.88	2.16	.78
Spring '86				
whole sample	2.09	.97	2.11	.83
above median	2.17	.75	2.45	.73
below median	2.03	1.13	1.52	.79

(a) semester of intervention

DISCUSSION

Results of this study show that transfer students whose first semester GPA after transfer put them in academic jeopardy, who meet individually with a counselor for diagnostic and prescriptive information, and who sign a mutually arrived at academic action plan with the counselor, persist with less academic action taken than do students with no such treatment. The differences in rates of students whose preintervention GPA

was below the median who were registered and "in good standing" are statistically significant and endure at least one semester after intervention.

The diagnostic and prescriptive interview plan, which requires an average of 30 minutes of professional staff time per interview, is economical, practical, straight-forward, and effective in helping transfer students who have at least a sophomore grade level and who are in academic jeopardy, to improve their academic performance and stay in school. The intervention warrants replication.

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